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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5720
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 1413
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SUBJECT: WHERE IS CARLOS ORTEGA?: BRV CAPITALIZING ON LABOR
LEADER'S PRISON ESCAPE

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DAN LAWTON,
REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary. Carlos Ortega, the leader of the anti-Chavez Venezuela Workers Confederation (CTV), along with three jailed military officers, reportedly escaped August 13 from a maximum security military prison. Going on the offensive, the BRV is accusing the opposition of engaging in a "U.S.-sponsored conspiracy" and an extra-constitutional destabilization campaign. Chavez is also widely expected to use the escape as an excuse to engage in another purge of the military. He may also use this as a tool to attack the opposition. Consensus opposition candidate Manuel Rosales has wisely kept his distance from the breakout, merely noting publicly that he would pardon all political prisoners, if elected. Chavez's critics believe the incident demonstrates that there are still real fissures in the BRV's brand of "tropical totalitarianism." End Summary.

A Murky Escape

12. (C) Carlos Ortega, President of the Venezuela Workers Confederation (CTV), Venezuela's largest anti-Chavez union, was sentenced to nearly 16 years in prison in December 2005 for his participation in the December 2002-February 2003 national strike. His case attracted international protest, including an ILO determination that the strike was a legitimate labor action and a recommendation that the BRV drop all charges against the national strike organizers. Ortega fled Venezuela during his trial and received political

asylum in Costa Rica from March 2003 until August 2004. When Costa Rica revoked Ortega's asylum because he allegedly violated its terms, Ortega slipped back into Venezuela, and was captured in March 2005. Although still popular among some (but not all) CTV members, Ortega became an almost forgotten opposition figure while in Costa Rica.

13. (SBU) Right now, there is more rumor than fact surrounding the early morning August 13 escape of Ortega and the Farias brothers from Ramo Verde military prison. Two of the Farias brothers, along with 27 Colombians, were convicted in October 2005 of a paramilitary plot to overthrow President Chavez and sentenced to nine years. A third Farias brother was imprisoned in 2004 on separate charges. According to BRV officials, all four managed to walk out the front gate of the prison with the collusion of prison guards. Prison officials reportedly did not detect their absence for over ten hours, and when they subsequently closed the prison to family visits, a small prison riot ensued. None of the four prisoners convicted on political charges has turned up in or outside Venezuela since the escape, prompting early opposition speculation that they may have been "disappeared" by the BRV.

14. (C) The wife of jailed political prisoner (and former Finance Minister and retired Brigadier General) Francisco Uson told poloffs August 15 that she hypothesizes that Ortega and the Farias brothers managed to bribe their way out of jail and make their way to Colombia. She remarked that coincidentally she had spoken with Ortega August 12 during her most recent prison visit with her husband and that nothing that day appeared out of the ordinary. Reflecting on the military prison she visits regularly, she said Ramo Verde military prison is secure, but not by any means, escape-proof.

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15. (C) Senior investigative journalists told the Charge' August 16 that they believe Ortega made an "administrative" escape. Noting that Venezuela has a long history of "inside job" prison escapes, they theorized that Ortega and the Farias brothers probably secured the cooperation of prison guards by dint of the right mixture of money and sympathy. Discounting the idea that the BRV "disappeared" the four, one of the journalists noted that Ortega's girlfriend, whom he interviewed after the escape, appeared quite relaxed. They suggested that Ortega may have flown out of Venezuela on a private plane and predicted he would seek political asylum abroad, probably in Peru.

The BRV's Latest Stick

16. (C) The Chavez government, from the start, has tried to link the reported escape with the opposition. The pro-government daily "Diario Vea" alleges without any proof that a well-financed U.S.-sponsored opposition-implemented conspiracy was behind the break-out and fumes that a "fifth column" has infiltrated civil and military institutions. BRV investigators also publicly asserted that opposition TV station Globovision played a role in the escape. Edith Ruiz, Manager for Institutional Relations at Globovision, informed PAS August 14 that she is under investigation for speaking with Ortega on August 10 and with Ortega's girlfriend on August 13. The Bolivarian press also accused Ruiz of being in e-mail contact with a purported DHS official (Leopoldo Torres) in the United States (Note: Post contacted DHS, but the name of Leopoldo Torres did not appear in the DHS personnel database).

17. (C) Pronouncements from some opposition groups, including Accion Democratica, that political prisoners have a duty to try to escape may be playing into the BRV's spin that the opposition engages in extra-Constitutional political tactics.

Consensus opposition presidential candidate Manuel Rosales has carefully avoided that trap by stating that if he were elected president, he would free all political prisoners. Ortega's Venezuela Workers Confederation (CTV), wary of potential government foul play, has simply reminded the BRV that it has the responsibility to ensure the well-being of its prisoners.

18. (C) The reported escape also provides the BRV with an excuse to launch yet another purge of the armed forces. For the moment, the BRV is focused on punishing the military personnel at Ramo Verde Prison. Interior Minister Jesse Chacon announced August 16 that 14 military personnel would be charged with facilitating the escape. The lawyer for Captain Luis Figueroa, who had been imprisoned with the Farias brothers, publicly denounced Venezuelan Military Intelligence (DIM) for torturing his client. Uson's wife told us August 15 that she received a text message from inside the prison reporting that a captain had been subjected to a severe beating as part of the BRV's investigation.

19. (C) The BRV's purge is likely to move beyond just the military prison. The National Assembly is composing its own mixed investigatory commission from its committees on defense, interior, and foreign affairs to examine what Chavista National Assembly member Ismael Garcia is calling the "political aspect" of the incident. Although military prisons fall under the purview of the defense minister, Interior Minister Jesse Chacon, already on the hot seat for unabated crime throughout the country, is taking some flak in

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the media for this incident. He may be vulnerable to a portfolio change whenever Chavez launches his next cabinet shuffle.

The Leaderless CTV

110. (C) Venezuela Workers Confederation (CTV) Secretary General Manuel Cova and other members of the CTV Executive Council told poloff August 7 that they intended to hold union elections in October and nominate the then-jailed Carlos Ortega for re-election to the union presidency. Cova said holding such elections would put the onus on the BRV to declare the elections invalid and further expose the BRV's anti-union practices. The CTV had been divided over whether to hold union elections with Ortega in jail and now must confront the new dilemma of whether to press ahead with elections with an Ortega either missing, underground, or in exile. Confronted by government obstructionism and competition as well, the CTV is a mere shadow of the once-powerful trade union it used to be.

Comment

111. (C) Unless and until Ortega or the other escapees surface, we will probably not learn much more about the details surrounding their August 13 escape from Ramo Verde military prison. The escape would appear to be an obvious embarrassment to the BRV in the two areas where public confidence is lowest, public security and corruption. So far, however, it is the BRV that is politically exploiting the breakout by tarring the opposition yet even more with the BRV's "foreign conspiracy" propaganda.

WHITAKER